

PART ONE

THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

The nature of this research project:

6th August, 1831, Opposite Swan Island, north east Tasmania.

This morning I developed my plans to the chief Mannalargenna and explained to him the benevolent views of the government towards himself and people. He cordially acquiesced and expressed his entire approbation of the salutary measure, and promised his utmost aid and assistance. I informed him in the presence of Kickerterpoller that I was commissioned by the Governor to inform them that, if the natives would desist from their wonted outrages upon the whites, they would be allowed to remain in their respective districts and would have flour, tea and sugar, clothes &c given them; that a good white man would dwell with them who would take care of them and would not allow any bad white man to shoot them, and he would go about the bush like myself and they then could hunt. He was much delighted.

The chief and the other natives went to hunt kangaroo: returned with some swan's eggs which the chief presented me as a present from himself - this was an instance of gratitude seldom met with from the whites.¹

My project's central argument is as follows:

Robinson's story relates a hugely significant moment in Tasmanian, Australian, and my own family's history. George Augustus Robinson recorded the incident when he promised a future that he could not possibly render in reality. This was a desperate lie to a people equally desperate to believe in their own survival.

Years later, Mannalargenna cut off his hair aboard ship north of Swan Island, probably as an act of grieving when he finally lost all hope. He died of pneumonia shortly afterwards on December 4, 1835 on Flinders Island - one month after Robinson had

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Robinson, G.A., *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers (of) George Augustus Robinson, 1829 - 1834*, ed. N.J.B. Plomley, Tasmanian Historical Research Society, Hobart, 1966.

transported him to Wybalenna from mainland Tasmania and four years after he had first met and begun travelling with Robinson on his 'Friendly Mission'.

The quoted passage leapt from page 394 of 1073 pages of incessant details of meals and climate which swamped and served to render this occurrence less distinct in the body of words which had consumed and subsumed it.

This account was made personally potent by time spent in the far north east of Tasmania during the genesis of the work which became *Shadow of the Spear* (1997). I witnessed across the sea the same islands as did the people in the story seven generations ago. Mannalargenna is my great great great great grandfather.

The power of the physical presence of the site, and the overlapping seams of history connecting then and now, became apparent to me when at the location. I realised that a material conjunction between past and present can provide the dialogue and means for a story, apparently set within a closed-book, to be reconsidered within a visual art-practice.

As a consequence, I made the materials described in the journal and placed them alongside the words from that time. They work together to speak of my awareness of the incomplete transaction, and they express the chance for a resolution to take place when memory is reactivated.

Objects rather than words can evoke a different sense of the past. This may stem from the possibility of their being physical entities within that original history. The dynamics of the placement of objects within an artwork can awaken and enliven the unspoken and unspeakable intimations of a story frozen within a written text.

I intend within my art-practice to return the word to the original action, by visually rendering and assembling objects, to recreate something of the sense and sensations of that moment when all things were possible, the point of conception. This place (which is my practice) is a contemplatory setting which reconsiders what could have been... and brings

elements back together for a reassessment of where we stand.

My practice essentially provides a means for history to be roused and renegotiated via present day perspectives – an act of scrutiny which the new vanguard in the study and writing of history also encourages.

I intend my works to be the catalyst for awakening memory in our present rather than merely providing alternative narratives or metaphorical traces of the past. I wish the components to be read – but read as a form of language that is so deep in our psyche that it cannot easily be voiced; a form of language where *meaning*, accumulates from a slowly engulfing *feeling*, as one stands in front of the work. My intention is to provide the possibility of a transitional moment between the viewer and the work.

Stories, explored visually through my practice, provide a vehicle to relay my obsession with the past as *not*-history. I explore the past as an entity dormant within us - as memories both individual and cultural. The proximity of these *memories* to a direct emotional response by a viewer is my means of discerning the cultural ills of this nation; my way to gauge how many stories are unsettled, unfinished, and uncomfortable in our psyche.

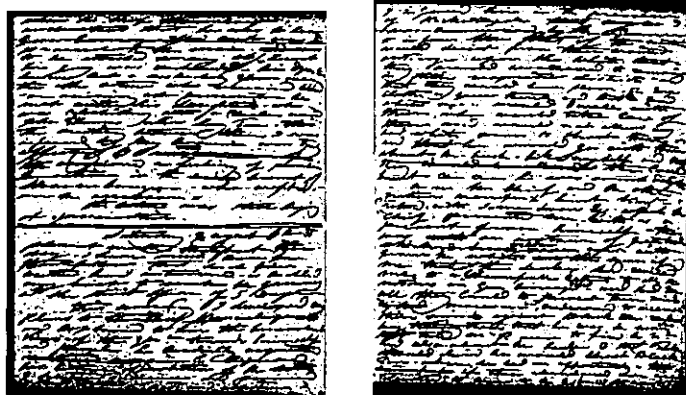


Fig.1

Robinson, George Augustus, 6 August 1831, Opposite Swan Island, north east Tasmania

Introduction:

What am I investigating ?

The version of the past I am interested in, is that which often has not been widely disseminated but has involved moments of interaction – usually conflict – between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people since invasion. Through my work, a viewer is invited to engage with specific moments, or a string of events – and the work becomes part of the continuity; and the outcome and possibly the catalyst for more re-thinking, on my part and hopefully for others.

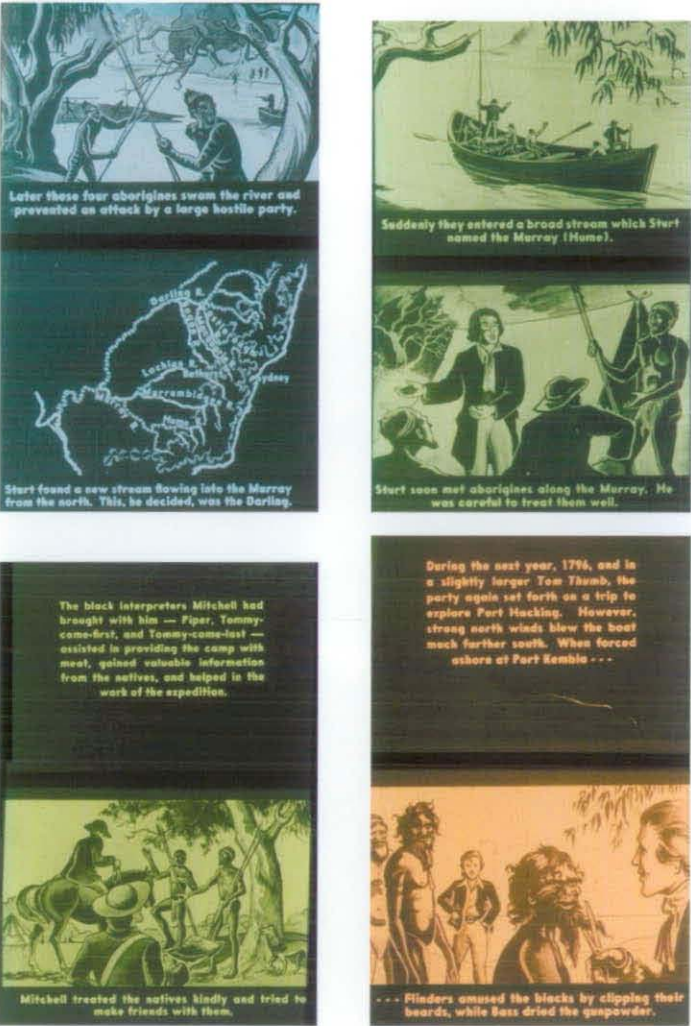


Fig.2 – Fig.5 Four Education Department of Victoria film stills, c1972

What inspired the work ?

The specific aspects of the past I am interested in are those which have leapt off the page for me, or which I have been told and could not believe my ears, seen

material evidence of and could not believe my eyes. Mannarlargenna's and Robinson's verbal agreement is one good example of these accounts which I feel charged to rework.

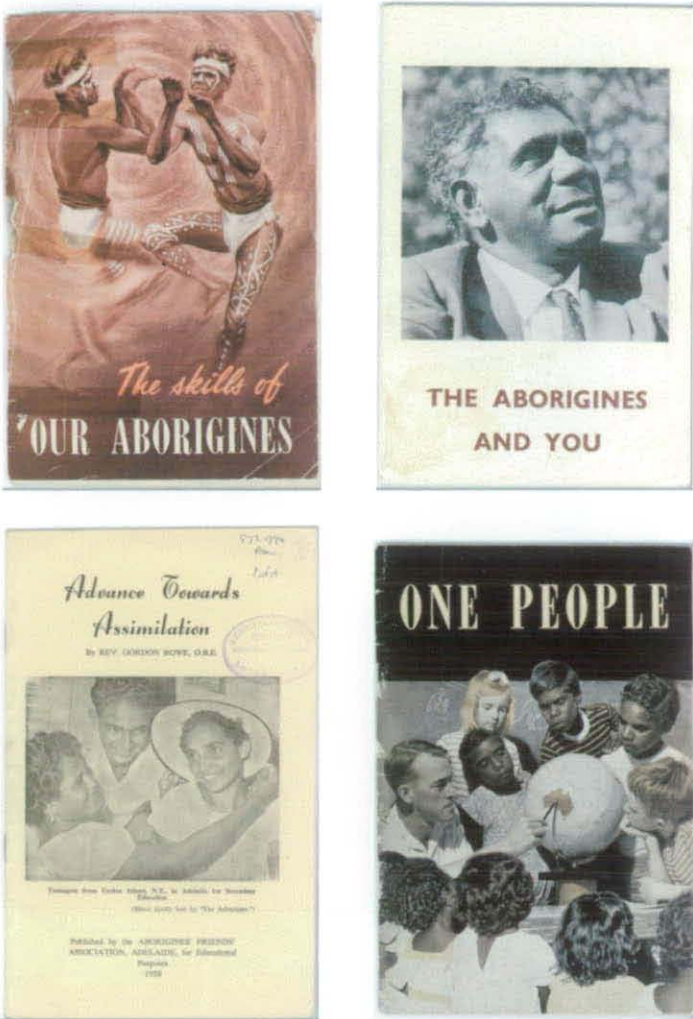


Fig.6 – Fig.9 Four Government of Australia Pamphlets, 1950-1960

I believe that it is possible to offer alternative ways of perceiving and *admitting into oneself* difficult pasts. My method is for my work to stay true to the original moment of awareness when I first apprehended that story which I wish to recount.

I intend to evoke within the viewer and through assembled objects the *sensation* of my first moment of encounter with the stories.

The act of reconstitution allows a viewer to meet with and absorb the essence of a past otherwise distanced;

surrounded by text and thereby obscured from a purely physical/visual emotive impact.

Where is it found?

The basis for my works has rarely been actively sought. Rather, in my daily navigations within my own world of second-hand shops, books, newspapers, archives, museums and conversations. I come upon these accounts and/or materials which inspire me to make the artworks; I sometimes search for further information or particular objects to create the work.

It is the way that I read my own world – not any active search - that provides the original material. This way is, for example, to see something awry between two historical accounts, or within the selection of second-hand books spread across Hobart op-shops.

This is why I consider myself sometimes a detective searching for clues of crimes which people seem to have forgotten or refuse to voice. I locate the traces in the objects of the everyday where they reverberate amidst the innocuous and, as disquietened reverie, within a passage in a vast tome. These objects are in a state of unrest when I encounter them, and I do not wish to conclude their state of flux and anticipation; rather I intend that these anxieties operate within the realm of visual art as fresh and challenging dialogues with the past.

Why is it important?

The work is my means of reflecting stories and society back at themselves and each other. I reconfigure what I see there and often subversively disclose a given history by aligning materials in a way which questions how we approach and incorporate ideas into personal memory in order to live with them.

What am I saying?

My interest lies in combating, or at least questioning, the single-viewpoint or perspective of history, maintained by fixing indigenous peoples in a landscape, as unmoving, unchanging, undeveloping, non-participating, singular and two-dimensional. My work centres on recontextualising historical stories and cultural meanings of objects. By retelling documented events from an alternate and differing perspective to that of a non-indigenous historical record, I challenge the recorded past, subversively

reworking it from the viewpoint of the 'invisible Aboriginal'.

Importantly, my practice raises questions about representation of people, stories and self in the national histories in which we are implicated. There need not be, and perhaps cannot be, answers, just an awareness that we are all authorial players in the dissemination of the past.

PART TWO

Relevant previous work:

I commenced Art School in 1991 at Curtin University, Western Australia. Before that, I had been attending TAFE night classes in drawing; and building a folio with which to apply to Curtin. I had never taken art classes at Secondary School and my tertiary qualifications were in archaeology², so this was a drastic departure and yet something I each day felt more certain I needed to undertake.

The previous year, I had travelled to the north west of Western Australia on the back of a motorbike. As we passed a huge eagle devouring something on the side of the highway the bird flew at that precise moment directly into our heads. After some skilled manoeuvring we pulled over. We were all stunned – the eagle and us. The eagle was placed blinking and quiet in the shade of a bush and we eventually rode on.

I truly saw everything flash before me in that moment - and I realised that I had not been honest with myself, or with my life, and that I had things to do. When we returned to the city a few days later I had changed. I immediately halved my employment hours, I began saving my drawings, I built an art-folio, went for an University interview to study art fulltime. I began to see things as they were and to take note of them. Slowly, slowly.

I think this story is an important prelude to where I am now. I completed my BFA at Curtin in 1993 and immediately packed to come to Tasmania. Something, started in the west, had finished - and now the real work had to begin in the right place: in this place now called Tasmania.

My grandmother left Tasmania for Victoria. Later, my mother promised my father not to tell 'us kids' about being Aboriginal. Our compact family unit moved to West Australia from Victoria and then broke apart after years of secrets and misdemeanours. These were all strands that took many years to resurface in me and my family. There were denials, unaccountable absences, loss, and lost ties, time and place. My family embodied the unspoken, the unwritten, an affliction

which I wanted to somehow express; and then, perhaps, one day to see beyond.

Within the Honours program at the University of Tasmania in 1994, I gave myself free rein to approach and visually rework aspects of my own life, particularly my childhood. Sometimes the resulting works were simultaneously about myself and aspects of Australian society which I also considered unresolved. This way of working concurrently between my private *and* our public realm within an artwork has continued to the present day.

I will outline some previous works that established some key modes of working within my practice, including the collection of objects and historical information, and my use of alternative assemblages to disseminate stories or parts of stories.

Medical Series, 1994 is a series of ten folded tin or galvanised iron cases.³ These are 'case studies' depicting western means of supposedly determining racial difference which is then aligned with inferiority.



Fig.10

Julie Gough, *Medical Series*, 1994. Ten pressed tin cases, mixed media. Variable dimensions.

These cases were my accumulations of scientific understandings of 'identity' at a time when I was directly learning about the position and representation of my extended indigenous family (and thus myself), by people both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in Tasmania.

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The 'case studies' I sculpturally worked were titled: *Intelligence Testing - The Porteus Maze Test, Fingerprint Patterning, Skull Dimensions, Physiological Adaptation to Cold, Brain Capacity, Hair Differentiation, Eyeball Weight, Tooth Avulsion, Body Odour, Earwax Consistency.*



Fig.11

Julie Gough, *Intelligence Testing - The Porteus Maze Test*, 1994. Tin, mixed media. 395 x 295 x 80 mm⁴

I created a series of pieces *about* the body. There was a freedom in allowing different portions of the body to speak of the ways in which they had been tested and probed. This became a series about processes of collection. The often familiar objects within the cases instigated a dialogue between the viewer and the work prior to the texts being read.⁵ I began to see the carrying-potential which configurations of objects could hold.



Fig.12

Julie Gough, *Physiological Adaptation to Cold*, 1994. Tin, mixed media. 270 x 190 x 150 mm.⁶

⁴ *Intelligence Testing - The Porteus Maze Test*. This work was based on the 1950/60's anthropological test-on-paper given to indigenous peoples (in this case the Kimberley region of North West Australia) to determine IQ by the speed one traversed a maze on paper by pencil. This was the first time these 'subjects' (Aboriginal people) had held pencil or paper....

⁵ These works each had texts from scientific books and journals silk-screened onto perspex which covered and enclosed the objects. This way of assembling objects was pivotal to the future development of works incorporating or eliminating the written word.

⁶ *Physiological Adaptation to Cold*. This work was a visual reconfiguration of the research of a 1960s Czechoslovakian research team who 'placed' Central-desert Aborigines in refrigerated-meat-vans overnight to determine their 'Physiological Adaptation to Cold'. The work *Medical Series* was acquired by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 1995

This work was central to my Honours submission and subsequently was exhibited in *Perspecta* 1995 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The Whispering Sands (Ebb Tide) 1998

The Whispering Sands (Ebb Tide) 1998 is a more recent work that reflects further exploration of ways to represent historical actions as live and resonant through time and space. This body of work was



Fig.13

Julie Gough, *The Whispering Sands (Ebb Tide)*, 1998. Sixteen life-size pyrographically inscribed portraits on plywood placed in tidal flats at Eaglehawk Neck. Variable dimensions.

constructed during a year (1997/1998) in London and was initially exhibited indoors as part of my MFA submission.⁷

The installation comprised sixteen life-size pyrographic portraits hand-burnt on plywood, of British individuals whose influence historically and subsequently impacted on Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The figures were placed in the tidal flats at Eaglehawk Neck, Southern Tasmania during November 1998.⁸

⁷ In an indoor simulated seascape with sound, lighting and a super 8 projection-loop and viewed from a wooden viewing platform. Goldsmiths College, University of London, 1998.

⁸ Eaglehawk Neck is a narrow isthmus with a tidal flat on one side and a raging sea on the other. It was across this isthmus and onto the Tasman Peninsula in 1830

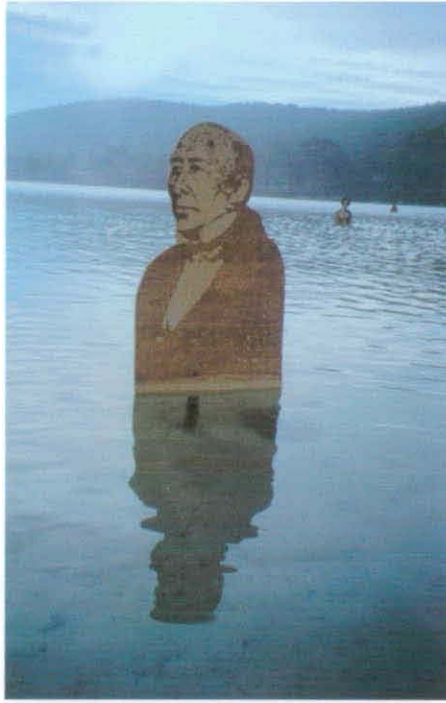


Fig.14

Julie Gough, *The Whispering Sands (Ebb Tide)*, 1998. Sixteen lifesize pyrographically inscribed portraits on plywood placed in tidal flats at Eaglehawk Neck. Variable dimensions.

Those assembled were collectors; they accumulated material culture, stories, human remains, anthropological/medical information and even Tasmanian Aboriginal children in the names of science, education, history, anthropology and for the increase of their own personal status and power. I decided (as an exercise and partially an exorcism) to collect these collectors themselves (as images) and reduce them to a nameless conglomerate mass such as they had imposed on indigenous people last century.

On the flats the figures submerged and re-emerged with the action of the tides; the tide enacting the position of memory. Placed as though they were wading into shore, they operated as a form of mnemonic trigger. Their emergence from the water suggested that their presence and deeds rest still within our memories, still haunting us.

that Governor Arthur planned to drive and trap all Tasmanian Aboriginal people during the military operation called the 'Black Line'. This was a period known as the 'Black War' when Europeans were panicked by unknown numbers of Aboriginal people at large. The 'Black Line' witnessed hundreds of settlers walking in close formation across the island in an attempt to push Aboriginal people onto the Peninsula and force their surrender. Instead hundreds of Aboriginal people slipped past – only two were caught.



Fig.15

Julie Gough, *The Whispering Sands (Ebb Tide)*, 1998. Sixteen lifesize pyrographically inscribed portraits on plywood placed in tidal flats at Eaglehawk Neck. Variable dimensions.

This was a response to my awakening ideas about our co-residency with the past, and to questions arising about our avoidance and consignment of the past to a peripheral textual dimension called 'history'.

I wanted to communicate in this work how I felt about the actions of those people. In fact, I knew very little about them except how they impacted on Tasmanian Aboriginal Culture/society/individuals. I had only known what one-third of these people looked like when I commenced the work; yet I unaccountably felt it was important to reveal their faces back in Tasmania where their activities converged.

Public reaction to this work was varied. One comment from several viewers was that they wanted *more*; they wanted to know who the people were; they wanted a resolved work, not one that was left very open-ended. They wanted explanatory panels, brochures, guided tours. The growing anxiety among locals and tourists concerning the anonymity of the figures was an important communication for me to understand; and yet, to retain this dis-ease was a central aspect of the work. This was one irony of the work - that I did not particularly want these people to be safely anonymous - but to name these figures (within this

particular work) would negate the power of their semi-absent silence and give them another presence - a historical fact-related occupancy of the site rather than an evocative sensorial memory position. I needed instead to ensure that they remained unknown, thus mirroring the vast un-naming of indigenous people upon whom these collectors had inflicted multiple misdeeds. Therefore, I did not regard closure as important for the work. The installation itself was an investigation of what could be revealed by placing this work in a site laden with colonial narratives and under the forces of nature beyond text and speech.



Fig.16

Julie Gough, *The Whispering Sands (Ebb Tide)*, 1998. Sixteen lifesize pyrographically inscribed portraits on plywood placed in tidal flats at Eaglehawk Neck. Variable dimensions.

The experience of installing and considering the work at Eaglehawk Neck was very significant for my practice on various levels. I was suddenly in a situation that was very real - and was not protected by gallery lighting and extensive toolkits, assistants and opening hours, or surrounded by supportive peers, during the life of the installation.

I instead learned of tides and estimated water depths. I waded among octupuses and avoided times when a march of a million crabs occurred across the tidal flat. The installing of the work in real time with constraints from nature and my own physical capabilities ensured that I would necessarily interact with place and people at the Neck in appropriate ways - or the work could not *work*.

Hence, I found myself in conversation with Rose, who for decades had been gathering octupuses by moonlight in this bay. She sought me on-site to discuss

the work. She had been absorbed by the figures whilst wading the bay the previous night under full moon and had shone her spotlight to animate their forms.

I was inspired that a private interaction of this kind had occurred, as I had essentially seen the work as a distant drive-by car piece. I had envisioned the work as *Something Unsettling emerging from the Bay*, which at vehicular speed and at high tide, registered as a threatening approach of peculiar monochromatic mute zombie-like spectres wading from the 19th century. I suppose these figures were objects marking time and tide, and I could have left them there to deteriorate and fade; perhaps, then, in themselves to perform a rite of passage of their deeds. Instead I have a mass of waterworn visages huddled together, a layered 10cm of plywood awaiting their next group assignment.

This site-specific way of working with new constraints, uncertain outcomes, unpredictable rewards or frustrations, has widened my art making horizon immeasurably.